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ABSTRACT

This paper explores implications of the preschool program in Reggio Emilia, Italy for the early childhood education curriculum in the United States. Reggio Emilia's municipal early childhood program incorporates high quality day care with a carefully articulated philosophy of education. The curriculum of the preschools is based on a project approach to learning that emphasizes symbolic representation. Children and teachers are viewed as partners in learning. Teachers serve as facilitators of a constructivist curriculum: as provocateurs who create discontinuous or discrepant experiences and problems. Teachers also serve as careful observers who document children's growth. Teachers view art as central to the educational process, as a form of exploration and expression. Each preschool has an art teacher who is available to work with the children and their teachers throughout the day. Projects, which provide numerous opportunities for symbolic representation, may last for several days or months. A sequence of responding, recording, playing, exploring, hypothesis building and testing, and provoking occurs in most projects. The projects described in detail concern shadows, self-portraits, war play, enemies, and outer space. (RH)

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Projects and Provocations: Preschool Curriculum Ideas From Reggio Emilia, Italy

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Considerable interest is currently being expressed by U.S. teachers and researchers in a preschool program in Reggio Emilia, Italy, in part as a result of a traveling exhibition (The Hundred Languages of Children) making its way around the U.S.[1] The purpose of this article is to explore implications of the exhibition - and the preschool program it represents - for early childhood curriculum here in the U.S. Before describing what goes on inside the classrooms, however, a brief description of the cultural setting is in order.

The town of Reggio Emilia is located in the region of Emilia-Romagna, considered to have the most highly developed and well subsidized social services in Italy, with child welfare a major priority (Rankin, 1985). The site of Italy's first public preschools, Reggio Emilia has a municipal early childhood program that incorporates high quality daycare with a carefully articulated philosophy of education. Today, Reggio Emilia has 22 community preschools and 13 infant/toddler centers serving, respectively, almost half of all 3- to 6-year-old town children, and approximately 40% of those up to the age of 3 years.[2]

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[1] The exhibition is currently showing at the Capital Children's Museum in Washington, D.C., where it will remain through November, 1990.

[2] 95% of all 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children in Reggio Emilia attend some form of preschool, including private, church, and state-run programs (Center for Educational Research, 1989).

Over the last decade, the Reggio Emilia program has attracted thousands of visitors world-wide, including hundreds from Sweden, West Germany, Norway and Spain, as well as smaller delegations from countries as diverse as Argentina, Japan, and the USSR. Today, an increasing number of U.S. early childhood educators are turning to Reggio Emilia for insights and inspirations regarding today's child care challenges.

Why so much interest in this Italian early childhood program? Interest within the U.S. derives from at least two separate sources. Concerns regarding the appropriateness of full-day programming and increasingly academic program content in the preschool period (Bredekamp, 1987; Karweit, 1988; Seefeldt, 1989) are being addressed at a time when U.S. educators are becoming cognizant of the diversity of early childhood goals and strategies represented in cultures outside the U.S. (c.f., Tobin, Wu & Davidson, 1989). The arrival of the exhibition from Reggio Emilia was timely, and subsequent presentations devoted to the preschool program (e.g., at the 1987, 1988, and 1989 NAEYC Annual Conferences) have generated additional interest and curiosity.

The curriculum of the Reggio Emilia preschools is characterized by what might be described as a "project approach" to learning (Katz & Chard, 1989) for both children <u>and</u> teachers, with a strong reliance on children's preference for symbolic representation - two features which may be found in high quality early childhood programs elsewhere. Yet the work produced by the

children of Reggio Emilia astounds and delights most viewers, and suggests an expansion not only of the typical preschool thematic approach, but of children's creative, communicative and intellectual potentials as well. The beliefs that accompany this curriculum approach will be discussed in this article, drawing on knowledge of several different Reggio Emilia projects.[3]

Children and teachers are partners in learning

As do most readers of Young Children, teachers in Reggio Emilia believe that children learn best when they're interested in what they're doing, and that children are most interested in ideas that derive from their own experiences and observations of their own environments. Many of their beliefs are consistent with a child-centered approach to early education, albeit with a philosophy of shared control (Seefeldt, 1989) similar to the "child-centered Type B" described by Lay-Dopyera & Dopyera (1989). Reggio Emilia teachers, remaining convinced of the value in following children's leads, none-the-less believe that learning is facilitated by their active involvement in projects and problems teachers help determine.

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[3] The author has lived and worked in Italy, and personally visited preschool and infant/toddler classrooms in Reggio Emilia on numerous occasions. On-going exchanges with Reggio Emilia personnel - including the director, Sergio Spaggiari; former director, Loris Malaguzzi; curriculum coordinator, Tiziana Filippini; and teachers such as Carla Rinaldi - as well as U.S. early childhood educators Lella Gandini, Carolyn Pope Edwards, George Forman, and Baji Rankin also serve as a basis for this discussion.

Teachers in Reggio Emilia wear many caps. They serve as **facilitators** of a constructivist curriculum - the provider of props, materials, time, and space in which children can work. In this role they enact the two behaviors ascribed as critical for teachers of young children: they engage children with the phenomena or problem at hand, and then provide opportunities (and reasons) for them to explain to others what it is they have observed and understood (Duckworth, 1987; Katz & Chard, 1989). Reggio Emilia teachers also see themselves as **provocateurs** - the creators of discontinuous or discrepant experiences, and problems to be solved. Throughout, they serve as the **"memory"** of the group. Teachers are particularly skilled observers who give themselves assistance in the form of photographs and tape recordings of children's activities and discussions in and out of classroom, tapping into what children know as well as what they don't know. Such documentation conveys a message to children of the importance attributed to their efforts, and provides an opportunity for projects to be shared with parents and other children. Such careful observing also serves a purpose directly related to the teacher's fourth role - that of a **learner** along with the children. Teachers share their observations with one another during weekly staff meetings to inform their curriculum planning, thereby increasing their collective understanding of how children learn. Teachers also frequently join in children's interactions in ways that foster mutual creative exploration,

theory building, and problem-solving. This strategy - of teacher as participant and observer - enables teachers to construct for themselves an understanding of children's development as they simultaneously encourage children to construct their own understanding of the world around them.

Art is fundamental

Teachers in Reggio Emilia believe that art is inseparable from the rest of the curriculum, and should be viewed as central to the educational process both as a form of exploration as well as expression (Gandini & Edwards, 1989). This belief is immediately apparent upon visiting the Reggio Emilia program. Perhaps the most striking feature is the beauty of the schools and the individual classrooms. Much of what is available to look at is the art work of children, displayed not only to create a pleasant atmosphere, but also to present new ideas for children to start from in their subsequent efforts.

Children are given many opportunities to discover the properties of various artistic materials, in the belief that exploration is essential for emerging aesthetic awareness. By the time they are five years old, some children will have had four years of experience with traditional supplies such as paint, clay, and paper.**(Insert photo A here)**. They also make extensive use of recycled materials such as leaves, flower petals, fabric scraps, wire and corrugated cardboard. Yet art in these preschools includes more than the provision of supplies.

Even more than the belief in encouraging exploration of materials and the aesthetics of the environment, teachers in Reggio Emilia believe in the importance of nurturing children's natural tendency to utilize the symbolic languages - including drawing, painting, constructing, and creative dramatics - as a way to make sense of their world. This priority is reflected in the fact that each school has an art teacher who is available to work with the children and their teachers throughout the day, in either a large central atelier (workroom) or the smaller mini-atelier within each classroom (Gandini, 1984).

Projects as problem solving

One strategy that provides numerous reasons for symbolic representation and maximizes opportunities for shared problem-solving is the use of short- and long-term projects. The Reggio Emilia reliance on projects also reflects another belief held by teachers - a belief in the need for long periods of time for both children and teachers to stay with an idea, to "enter inside a situation, to enjoy..., to discover..., and finally - to find one's own way out." [4]

While some projects may last only for a period of several days, others have lasted for as long as several months. In many cases the project takes a direction that varies from the teacher's expectations, but in each case the teacher(s) and

[4]Tiziana Filippini, presentation to Syracuse University students, June 12, 1989.

children work together for as long as there is interest. Since projects at Reggio Emilia may involve the entire class or only a small group of children, there is considerable opportunity for overlap. It is extremely unusual, therefore, to enter into any of the preschool classrooms and not find evidence of one or more projects underway.

The projects with which young children become engaged in Reggio Emilia are of three broadly defined types: those which result from a child's natural encounter with the environment, those reflecting mutual interests on the part of the teacher and children, and those which are based on teacher concerns regarding specific cognitive and/or social concepts (Gandini & Edwards, 1988; Edwards, Forman, & Gandini, in preparation).

One project that is included in the exhibition illustrates the way in which a child's spontaneous play on a sunny day can turn into an extensive exploration of the properties and magic of l'ombra. As is pointed out in the exhibition, there are few things as rich, as fascinating, as mysterious to a child as a shadow. While early childhood teachers are encouraged to value and foster such experiences (Pitcher, Feinburg, & Alexander, 1989), rarely do they become the focus of curriculum planning to the extent that they do in Reggio Emilia. To these teachers, such natural responses to the environment are the "building blocks" of curriculum, often leading to long-term investigations of related areas of interest.

In this exploration of shadows, the teacher "captures" the event through a photograph.(insert photo B here) The sharing of the photograph leads to more elaborate attempts to aim for variations in the forms their own shadows might take, as well as additional attempts to "capture" their own shadows (insert photo C here). In many preschool classrooms, this would essentially conclude the activity. In the Reggio Emilia classroom, however, this is just the beginning. The children are encouraged to explain (by drawing) their understanding of how their own shadows are created (insert photo D here). In this way they must not only come to terms with their own beliefs about the event, but they must find a way to communicate those perceptions to others. Children then spend many more days, outside as well as inside the classroom creating and observing shadows. They are encouraged to utilize a variety of objects in the creation of their shadow images, and as they continue in their explorations, they begin to develop theories about factors influencing the outcome of the shadow. The teacher follows their lead by providing the props and some questions for a series of experiments. (insert photo E here). "How many ways can you make a shadow of a pear?" "Does it matter how far away the light is from the pear?"

The results of children's play and experimentation are again represented by drawings, now more elaborate and inventive, and this time the teacher joins in by presenting the children with a challenge, or what is referred to as a provocation: a yellow

sticker "sun" on each child's paper. The problem created is to determine the direction and shape of the resulting "shadow." Not only are children able to respond successfully to such challenges, but they frequently create additional challenges for themselves (note the inclusion of a flashlight as a competing source of light). **(insert photo F here).** This sequence of events -responding, recording, playing and exploring, hypothesis building, hypothesis testing, and provoking - takes place within most projects of the children and teachers of Reggio Emilia.

Chance events are not the only "blocks" that Reggio Emilia teachers utilize in their curriculum planning. Another type of project found throughout the Reggio Emilia program is based on the teachers' understanding of the keen interest young children display in themselves - their bodies, their feelings, their sense of being alive. This type of project - which in some classrooms is on-going - also represents an interest teachers have in helping children learn to appreciate themselves as unique individuals who are also contributing members of the class group.

Children are given repeated opportunities to reflect on the image they present to others, through the omni-presence of mirrors, discussions of self-portraits as well as photographs taken by the teacher. These activities and discussions are frequently repeated throughout the year, thereby providing the opportunity to reflect on previous interpretations and perceptions. Such repetition enables children to modify

previously held beliefs, and certainly contributes to increased observational and representational skills. Because the same group of children and teachers remain together for a three-year period, competencies and interests can be elaborated upon as they develop over a longer period of time.[5]

Self portraits are therefore often followed by other self portraits, along with dictated stories describing one's self. **(Insert photo G here)** In some classes, children compare their self explorations, noting features that are similar as well as those that are different. Such sharing might lead to discussions of feelings, their sources, and their expression. **(Insert photo H here)**. Or the challenge might become the number of ways possible to represent facial parts such as eyes, noses, and mouths **(Insert photo I here)**. These activities frequently lead to other discussions, theorizing, and representation regarding such things as communication **(Insert photo J here)**, the means of body movement **(Insert photo K here)**, and variations on the theme of "feet" **(Insert photo L here)**. The results of such exploration are frequently reproduced in book form, to be shared with families, friends, and other classrooms **(Insert photo M here)**.

The final type of project to be discussed in this article is one that is initiated by the teacher(s) in response to an

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[5] Each class of children, while varying in number from 12 infants to 25 preschoolers, typically has two teachers (in addition to the school art teacher, the cook, and auxiliary staff).

observed need on the part of some or all of the children. In this example, shared with me during a recent visit to Italy, teachers and parents were concerned about the extent to which war toys, especially heroic figures based on popular television cartoons, were assuming a major role in children's dramatic play. Rather than insisting that the heroic figures be left at home - as would be the case in most U.S. preschools - the teachers decided to attempt to redirect the interest in the war play. With the cooperation of parents, children were taken to a nearby toy store, where they went through the war toy inventory, pointing out features of interest. A video-game machine with space vehicles was brought into the classroom (insert photo N here). In subsequent discussions, the teachers directed the children's attention to the space elements contained in many of the toys and hero figures. They then suggested that the children recreate the space scene in which the typical battles took place. Several space vehicles were constructed out of cardboard boxes and recycled material, (insert photo O here) and previously uninvolved children were invited to join in the project to assist in the creation of a "space like" atmosphere. This project engaged a number of children over an extended period, and within a short time the actual war figures were put aside as new challenges and problems associated with the space project (including how to communicate with an alien being) took their place.

This project transformed the appearance of the classroom, as it provided opportunities for children to explore their concepts of war play, enemies, and outer space in a supportive environment. Such an approach not only enabled teachers the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind children's fascination with war toys and war play in general, but also provided them with a more direct way to encourage prosocial values and foster critical thinking about such issues as conflict and negotiation (Edwards, 1986; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990).

In each of the projects just described, children are given opportunities to explore and interact with materials and objects related to the project, during which time teachers observe, document, and engage children in conversation of the sort that encourages "reflection, exchange and coordination of points of view" (Lay-Dopyera & Dopyera, 1989). Classrooms and schedules are flexibly arranged such that children may work on a project of interest throughout the school day without the need to return things to their places prior to the completion of an activity. In some cases large groups of children will be divided into smaller groups, with each responsible for exploring, observing, documenting different aspects of the event. In others, only a few children will remain involved, although the reporting back of their activities to the total group is encouraged. (see photos P, Q, & R for possible inclusion).

What are the implications of this Italian program for early childhood education here in the U.S.?

There are many lessons to be learned from the teachers and children of Reggio Emilia (New, in preparation). We are reminded of the importance of providing for and enabling children's engagement in meaningful work. Such extensions of children's experiences not only validate the importance of their interest in the world around them, but afford children multiple opportunities to reflect on their understanding of the world - in this case, shadows, themselves, conflict and outer space. When children rather than teachers are asked to explain phenomena, they gain greater clarity for themselves and they learn from each other. They also learn to depend on themselves, since their ideas are taken seriously and they are "the judges of what they know and believe" (Duckworth, 1987).

We are encouraged by the conception of teachers as learners, a feature reflecting what Lillian Katz referred to as the "principle of congruity," such that adults are treated to the same developmental principals used with children (1975). On-the-job training remains rare here in US, and staff development efforts are frequently removed from the actual needs of the classroom teacher, but the example set for us in Reggio Emilia makes clear the benefit to teachers <u>and</u> children when theories of child development come alive in the day-to-day classroom setting (Perry, 1989).

We are challenged, by nature of implied contrasts, to reconsider the relationship between our own values and beliefs and our teaching goals strategies (Shigaki, 1983). Simply believing that learning is meaningful only when children "ascribe personal meaning to new information," is not enough if we don't also provide sufficient opportunities for such learning "from the inside out" (Hoffman & Lamme, 1989). While creativity and individual expression are highly valued in the U.S., we often neglect the expressive arts in favor of competing demands within the curriculum. We certainly don't provide children with the luxury of time to explore their ideas; the American tendency to move ever onward inhibits numerous opportunities for growth within the classroom. Such priorities become increasingly critical as children spend more time in classrooms and less time directing their own activities.

And finally, we are inspired by the potential for enhancing children's creative and intellectual development. The works produced by 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children in Reggio Emilia are the results of prolonged efforts on the part of children, fostered by a set of teacher expectations (about what children can do)$608'whmap exceed our own. Such expectations (and differences in them) are based not only on cultural "folk wisdom" but also actual experiences with children (Edwards & Gandini, 1989).

As for the "conundrum" regarding who or what should determine the curriculum - the nature of children, their play, or adult conceptions of children's needs - (Evans, 1982, p. 115; Seefeldt, 1989) there is no such dilemma in Reggio Emilia. Teachers and children work together, responding in turn to the observations and provocations of each.

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